

A revised, concise history of the Masonic Order of Pilgrim Preceptors

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This is a summary of the history of the Masonic Order of Pilgrim Preceptors. The primary sources of information that were used are the personal recollections of Andrew Barry Stephenson, and what was conveyed to him by John Edward Nowell Walker, both former Grand Masters of the Order. Recent research in the Archives of the United Grand Lodge of England and elsewhere shed light and filled some of the gaps in the narrative of the birth of the Order and contributed to the presentation of a more detailed picture of its origins and formative period.

The Order was constituted in current terms only in 1984, but its roots and especially its ritual go way back in time. During the first quarter of the 20th century, three actors and masons found an unknown ritual of Irish origin drafted sometime after the year 1862, in the library of a Masonic hall or lodge somewhere in Northwestern England, most probably in the greater Liverpool area. One of the three actors was definitely the very distinguished English mason Albert Le Fre (1870-1969).

Sometime later, the same three actors found themselves idle and forced to stay in a hotel in Manchester for a long and typically wet weekend, because the play in which they had been performing suddenly 'folded'. Then, perhaps to while away the time, they conceived the idea of bringing to life some of the information they had found in the forgotten ritual. By the end of the weekend, they had produced a manuscript version of a ritual that was later augmented and typewritten. Thus, two ceremonies of a Masonic degree called *The Pilgrim Preceptors* were born. However, this was a private enterprise. The "Creators and Enshriners" of the Order made no attempt to invite others to join or to see the ceremony performed.

A copy of the revised typewritten edition of the ritual is kept in the library of the United Grand Lodge of England. From the references contained therein, we may surmise that the creators of the ritual had set the prerequisites for obtaining the degree right from the beginning. The Candidate is required to be a Past First Principal of a Royal Arch Chapter and therefore, as was then the custom, he was necessarily a Past Master of a Craft Lodge. In addition, the Candidate was required to have received all the Allied Masonic Degrees of the time. This last requirement is no longer necessary after the constitution of the Grand Conclave of the Order.

The original manuscript ritual together with a revised typewritten edition of the ritual remained in the possession of Albert Le Fre and after his death in 1969 it was passed on to his son Eric Norman Le Fre (1903-1979), an actor and a high ranking and active mason in many Masonic orders of that time.

In 1978, one year before Eric's death, both documents were passed on to John Edward Nowell Walker (1901-1991), who received the degree by oath from Eric and acquired verbally all rights to the Order for a sum of half a penny!

When Eric passed away in 1979, Walker at an unknown time obligated by oath and communicated the degree to five other masons, after a meeting of the August Order of Light held in South London, namely Capt Donald Michael Penrose (1891-1990), Andrew Barry Stephenson (1924-2021), George Austin Duke (1908-1988), Arthur William Jary (1923-c.1982), and Howard Alan Stokes (1914-1996).

Sometime in the early 1980s but certainly before 1984, Walker appointed Howard Alan Stokes as *primus* Grand Master of the Pilgrim Preceptors. The Order since its beginning had its seat in Blackheath, a district of South-East London, in the residence of Andrew Stephenson until 2006, when Andrew decided to move to New Zealand where he died in February 2021.

By 1998 membership had expanded to just 41. On June 13th, 1998 at Blackheath, the Saint Augustine Conclave was the first 'Unit' of the Order to be Consecrated.

Over time, several changes to the Order were made: a full set of Regulations was adopted, and most importantly the original unit which had hitherto governed the Order became the St. Andrew Conclave, as a Time Immemorial Conclave to carry out the work of admission of new members from the London area and elsewhere in the U.K. and abroad.

The Order reached another milestone when under the Warrant of St. Andrew Conclave T.I., members of the Grand Conclave consecrated a new peripatetic Conclave in the U.S.A., in February 2010, and the first Conclave on Continental Europe in Athens, in April 2019. The Order has continued to expand and there are now 40 Conclaves; 32 in England and Wales, 5 in the USA, 2 in Greece, and 1 in Malta under 7 Regional Conclaves in Southern Counties (2014), Northern Counties (2015), Eastern Counties (2017), Heart of England (2017), United States of America (2019), Western Counties (2020), Mediterranean (2023).

There is no doubt that the Order proliferated at maximum speed between the years 2011 & 2020 and this is absolutely credited to the charismatic leadership of the then Grand Master Stephen Michael Ayres (1943-2020).

The Grand Masters of the Order were: Howard Alan Stokes [bef.1984-1987], John Edward Nowell Walker [1987-1990], Andrew Barry Stephenson [1993-2006], Benson Franklyn Catt [2006-2011], and Stephen Michael Ayres [2011-2020]. On June 27th, 2020 Most Illustrious Bro Jonathan Charles Roberts was proclaimed as the sixth Grand Master of the Order.